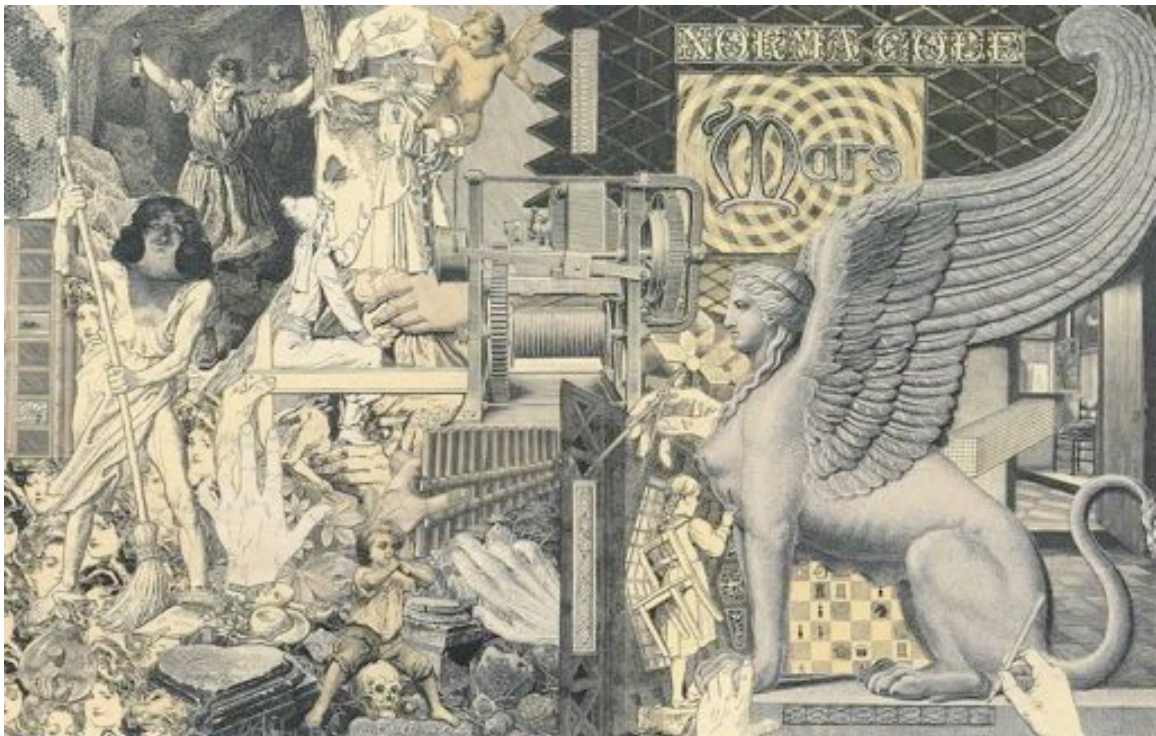


Jess: To and From the Printed Page

Traveling Exhibition Project Description



Cover for Norma Cole (Mars), 1993, Collage

Curated by Ingrid Schaffner

Organized and circulated by iCI (Independent Curators International), New York

Tour Dates: March 2007 through March 2009

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This exhibition focuses on the artist simply known as “Jess” (1923-2004), examining how his imagery was a form of dialogue with the written word, and concentrating on the relationship of his art to printed materials. It features over fifty original works of art, dated between 1952 and 1993, including collages the artist made for publication, the books and magazines in which they were reproduced, and several paintings, drawings and sculptures. The exhibition brings together, from disparate sources, numerous bodies of interrelated works, some of which have never before been presented together in public. The exhibition opens in March 2007 and travels to six to eight venues during a two-year tour.



The Dios Kuroi, 1963, Book of collages

I have always thought of the book as a form of collage space. -Jess

Jess: To and From the Printed Page, both the show and its accompanying catalogue concentrates specifically on how Jess’s visual works connect to the literary culture in which he thrived—personally, intellectually, and aesthetically—and use that focus as a new way to frame his work. Ultimately this exhibition enables the viewer to better understand and appreciate this “outsider” artist who, despite his widespread following of passionate devotees, is still an unfamiliar name within the larger contemporary art community today.

Printed matter served as subject, object, and fodder for Jess. As he once said, “I have always delighted in [the] relationship between words and images [and] thought of the book as a form of collage space.”¹ A contemporary of fellow California collagists Wallace Berman, Bruce Conner, and George Herms, with whom he is sometimes compared, Jess collaborated intensely with poets and other writers, and worked with small presses and limited-edition publications throughout his life. These collaborations were as much social as cultural interactions—a way of corresponding with friends and participating in their art.

Jess’s literary heroes, evoked directly or referenced throughout his work, included James Joyce, Lewis Carroll, Gertrude Stein, and his life partner Robert Duncan, the respected American poet. Joyce’s penchant for punning and verbal slippage, Carroll’s Victorian explorations of alternate realities, and Stein’s use of words as found objects and broken rules of syntax all find a place in Jess’s visual sensibility, as does the erudite, mythology-laden poetry of Duncan. Jess’s relationships to authors and artists—both predecessors and those in his midst—were densely intertwined. So intimately tied to the printed word is Jess’s work that it is almost impossible to consider his art without it.

¹ Michael Auping, *Jess: Paste-ups (and Assemblies) 1951-1983*, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL, 1983, p. 14.

The literary scene in San Francisco had begun to blossom in the 1940s and continued to flourish through the 1950s and 60s, starting with the anarchist, anti-authoritarian views of the Berkeley Renaissance poets, whose three chief writers were Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Robin Blaser (whom Jess also knew and related to through his art). By the mid 1950s, the Beat aesthetic had taken root in San Francisco, likewise engendering pacifist, libertarian thinking, as well as an unquestionably fresh approach to literature. It is from within this literary context of the Berkeley Renaissance and San Francisco's Beat culture that Jess matured as a visual artist.²



Ida, Duncan and I: Translation #18, 1966, Oil on canvas, mounted on wood

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, Jess developed his own artistic style, giving his works titles full of literary references that span the ages—from ancient and classical times to the contemporary moment in which he lived. While often described as an artist who worked outside the contemporary art mainstream for most of his career, Jess did receive some critical attention during his lifetime, starting in the early 1960s, for a body of work he began making in the 1950s: his elaborate collages. Collage, especially those in which there is the integration of text and image, was a process that Jess first became interested in as a child, and on which he worked throughout his artistic career. Composed of old book illustrations and photographs from magazines, Jess's collages, which he called "paste-ups," draw from 19th century illustrations and engravings and recall the Surrealist collage methods of Max Ernst, another artistic hero for Jess. In the opinion of guest curator Ingrid Schaffner, these collage works often evoke a Victorian sensibility as if filtered through a Surrealist lens.



Boob #3, 1954, Collage

Among Jess's early paste-ups is a work entitled *Boob #3*, 1954. This intricate and detailed visual composition provides a good introduction to Jess's collage sensibility and to the many connections made with various literary sources and references. *Boob #3* was used for the cover of the self-published journal of the same title, which included poetry by Duncan and images by Jess. In this work, a grisaille medley interweaves imagery with text, setting up a kind of elegant and amusing narrative replete with—among numerous other details—a diver plunging to the sea floor, while text attaches to him reading "up up up up....," an elegant leaping horse near the center, and somewhat less pleasant at the lower left, an overweight woman being accosted by stop signs. What may be seen, for instance, as

an intricate graphic design template by the printer simultaneously crosses into the realm of an art work in and of itself.

² Though known primarily as a visual artist, Jess also wrote poetry.



Tricky Cad: Case IV, 1957, Collage book

Many of these paste-ups were physically assembled in book format, such as the *Tricky Cad Case IV*, 1957. These books were made of comics which the artist cut-up and scrambled into page after page of newly-disordered sequences, to form a disrupted narrative. These early uses of popular imagery prompted later critics to consider Jess a progenitor of Pop art and an early exponent of Appropriation art.

Jess's paintings from this same period are reminiscent of the Symbolists (Jess was an avid admirer of Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard), cross-pollinated with contemporary abstraction. By the late 1950s his paintings had evolved from a kind of romantic abstraction into what Jess dubbed his "translations." In these

later works, images from both common and obscure printed sources are diligently copied in paint the way students once copied the work of the old masters, yet are built up with thick layers of impasto. The works all have related texts—literary sources which are inscribed on the backs of the paintings and occasionally integrated into the surfaces—that span a wide range of sources, from ancient to contemporary literature.

Throughout his artistic career, Jess had a tendency to work in series, often working in varied media within a given group. Among the many series to be included in this presentation, the *Echo's Wake* series is represented by collages, objects, and drawings all dating from the 1960s. *Echo's Wake: Part I*, 1961/1966, and *Echo's Wake: Part V*, 1961/1966, cross-pollinate topics from James Joyce's book, *Finnegan's Wake*, with the female mythological character, Echo.³ Evincing Joycean dream language and imagery throughout its various parts, this group of works simultaneously evokes the Greek story of Echo. According to several different versions of the myth, Echo was a nymph who had been torn into tiny pieces, and existed only as a disembodied voice, suffering from unrequited love for Narcissus. Apropos to the myth, Jess's *Echo's Wake* series was initially one overall whole that was subsequently cut into pieces, which will be reassembled for this presentation.



Echo's Wake: Part V, 1961/1966, Collage

While Jess often worked in series, he also recycled his works in various ways. His "salvages," begun in 1971, in which he repainted onto his own earlier abstract or semi-figurative canvases, or painted directly onto paintings from thrift shops and second hand stores. Jess used these unfinished or salvaged works to imagine and create a new layer of image and meaning while allowing some of the original underlying images to show through in appropriate sections. "*A Panic That Can Still Come*

³ The subject of Joyce's highly experimental novel was the dreams and nightmares of a family as they lie asleep at night.

Upon Me": Salvages II, 1963/1972, is an example of a salvage work. Each final work is associated with a literary inspiration, and while the text and the image do not always relate directly, their coupling is designed to expand the meaning of both.

In addition to his drawings, paintings, and collages, Jess also made assemblages or "assemblies," which have been described as the three dimensional counterparts to his paste-ups. These assemblies are impromptu sculptures that balance found objects on top of or inside each other and continue the collage tradition while also invoking literary connections. *Poet's Coffee Pot, 1963*, an example of such a work, is included in the exhibition.

Jess: To and From the Printed Page is particularly timely. Jess's art, especially his more intimate works on paper, his literary relationships, his collage-based practice, as well as his involvement with books and printed matter—overall, his densely layered, rich and what might even be called obsessive aesthetic—all strike resonant contemporary chords. Our world is more than ever one in which a never-ending stream of images and text cascade in and out of our consciousness. The computer enables us to download or cut-and-paste, to collage information into personally meaningful forms. Contemporary viewers are familiar with the processes and the impact of Jess's work because most of them have moved around images and text on the virtual page, and because independent self-publishing has become ever more prevalent in today's media culture. There is an empowering "do it yourself" quality to his art that contemporary audiences will recognize. "Zines," "blogs," and personal web sites might be seen as today's equivalent of Jess's small press productions. This capacity for each individual to act, to invent their own mode of expression using both word and image, whether through printed materials or through the Internet, is a central and timely tenet of the exhibition.



Cover for The Mutabilities & the Foul Papers, 1975, Collage

The Exhibition Catalogue

The 112-page iCI catalogue for this project begins with a brief prologue by John Ashbery, a prominent poet and cultural leader who is passionate about the work of Jess. The publication also includes two principal essays, by Ms. Schaffner, who discusses Jess's work from the thematic viewpoint of this exhibition; the second essay by literary scholar, Lisa Jarnot addresses the literary and cultural scene in which Jess worked. Jarnot, a poet herself, is currently writing a new biography on Robert Duncan as well. A third section written by Thomas Evans and Brandan Stosuy is a kind of glossary offering the reader an essential reference to terms used or coined by Jess and his circle, as well as information about the various small presses in Northern California that produced the books and other printed matter authored by Jess and his colleagues. No such reference material currently exists that bridges the visual with the literary world of the period.

The catalogue is fully illustrated with color and black-and-white reproductions of all of the works in the exhibition, as well as with documentary photographs of Jess, Robert Duncan, Ubu Gallery, and additional imagery providing a rich sense of the milieu in which Jess lived. An exhibition checklist is also included.

About the guest curator, Ingrid Schaffner: Ingrid Schaffner is a curator and writer. She is the Senior Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, where she has organized exhibitions of the work of Polly Apfelbaum, Karen Kilimnik, Barry Le Va, Sarah McEneaney, Pepón Osorio, and Richard Tuttle, along with the group exhibitions *The Big Nothing* and *The Photogenic: Photography through its Metaphors*. She has also curated *Pictures, Patents, Monkeys, and More...ON COLLECTING* organized by iCI (2001-02), *Julien Levy: Portrait of an Art Gallery* (AXA Gallery, 1998), *Deep Storage: Storage, Archiving and Collecting* (Haus der Kunst, 1998), and *Return of the Cadavre Exquis* (The Drawing Center, 1993), among others. She has written extensively on contemporary art for *Artforum*, *Parkett*, *Grand Street*, *Frieze*, and other publications. Her most recent book is *Salvador Dalí's Dream of Venus: The Surrealist Funhouse at the 1939 World's Fair* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2001).

Education Program and Materials

iCI's staff is working with an independent art educator to generate a set of program suggestions useful to the presenting venues, and is considering production of content for links from presenting venues' websites.

Among the ideas already generated for educational programming for this project are participatory poetry readings; cross-disciplinary panel discussions involving poets, literary scholars, art experts, cultural historians, and gender studies scholars; curriculum suggestions; and film screenings of programs produced pertaining to the Berkeley Renaissance and the Beat movement.

Basic facts:

Participation fee: \$9,000 for 8 weeks, plus incoming shipping (Institutions outside the continental United States must also pay customs fees as well as outgoing shipping charges to the U.S. border.)

Number of works: approximately 50 works of art, plus 30 items of ephemera

Space required: approximately 4,000-5,000 square feet

Tour dates: March 2007 through March 2009

Wall texts, press, and education materials will be provided. Five complimentary catalogues are provided; additional copies are available at 40% of retail price. Display cases to be supplied by presenting institution, required for books and printed matter; specific requirements will be forthcoming.